



## Born and Raised in Volcano

I have been surrounded by the rich cultural and natural resources of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park for my entire life. The Hawaiian culture is centered on our natural surroundings. Everything from religion to politics involves some level of the natural environment.

As a child we went on a lot of different trails to the coast and the mountain within the park. On many of these hikes, an elder would tell a story or point out the importance of different plants or animals to Hawaiians. I remember when hula hālau would gather plants from the forest for performances. There are a lot of traditional (and park) rules about when you can harvest that aids in the sustainability of the different natural resources.

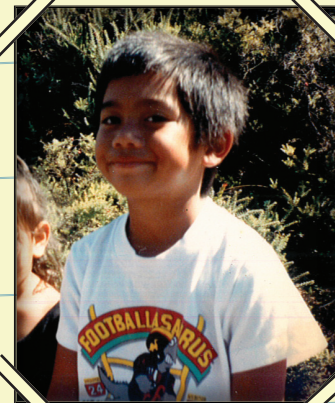
I have always known that I wanted to give back to my community and help my native people. I would have never guessed that I would have that opportunity in the place I feel so strongly attached to. One of the park's main missions is to protect natural and cultural resources, and it gives me great pride to be a small part of that mission. I work with the NPS Inventory and Monitoring Program to collect data on the plants in the park. The data can be used to show what types of invasive plants are threatening the native plant populations, and which management practices are working well. Monitoring data is important to understand the health of the forest and other plant communities over time.

This is the most enjoyable and rewarding job that I have ever had. The job has taken me to remote areas and allowed me to witness, firsthand, how detrimental invasive plant species can be to a native forest. Last season we worked in the 'Ōlā'a, Nāhuku, and east rift areas. The 'Ōlā'a wet forest has invasive weeds such as palm grass, strawberry guava, and Himalayan raspberry that dominate certain areas. This season we are working in Kahuku from the pasture land up to the subalpine areas. The Kahuku wet forest is dominated by native species such as kōlea, pilo, kāwā'u, and 'ōhi'a. It is exciting to see an area dominated by native plants. We have also seen some rare and endangered species in Kahuku.

One of the biggest threats to the native forest in Kahuku is feral ungulates like pigs and sheep. The forest has a rich diversity of native plants in the canopy (older/taller trees), but has a problem with regeneration. There are hardly any native seedlings due to foraging and trampling by the sheep and pigs. Without new native plants to succeed the current canopy, invasive plants could take over the forest. Currently, there is a big effort to eliminate the sheep from the Kahuku area. The plant monitoring data we collect can help the park to determine if this sheep removal effort is working well.

It has been a great honor to be able to build on my skills and knowledge at Hawai'i Volcanoes National park. I have had the pleasure of working with some great biologists that showed me different techniques in identifying unknown species. My pool of knowledge has grown tremendously thanks to my coworkers, and I have been able to grow as a person as we share personal experiences and ideas. I have learned so much from my elders and my coworkers through the years, but there is much more to learn. I hope to be a part of protecting the resources in my backyard for many more years to come.

-D. "Koa" Awong, NPS Biotechnician



Here I am in the "field" at ages 6 and 26.

